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[< Back to Regular Story Page](#)

Think green, in living color

KRIS SHERMAN; The News Tribune

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Verdant shades of perfect blades draw your eye immediately to the EnviroHouse lawn.

"No mowing or watering required," a sign proclaims.

Fresh raindrops glisten on the "grass," making the synthetic turf appear genuine.

But the blades have a distinctly unnatural feel. They're made from recycled tires.

The sidewalk looks like concrete, complete with cracks. But there's a bounce to it that lets you know its prime ingredient also is recycled rubber.

The shakes and shingles? Ditto.

It's easier than you think, being green, says Bill Smith, a senior environmental specialist for the City of Tacoma.

EnviroHouse, a recently opened 840-square-foot demonstration structure at the Tacoma Landfill, showcases environmentally friendly products and landscaping that needs little water or fertilizer.

There's a lot to see, including:

- A toilet with a "waterless" tank. The Sloan Flushmate compresses air to flush water from the bowl. At about 1 gallon per flush, it uses less water than traditional toilets.
- Bathroom backsplash tiles made of 100 percent recycled glass from bottles collected at the Tacoma Recycling Center.
- Carpet tiles manufactured from recycled fiber and installed with non-PVC backing.
- Window casings, baseboards and other touches made out of salvaged lumber or wood from forests managed to produce products now and in the future.
- Flooring made of bamboo and cork, both easily replenished materials.
- Solar tubes that magnify natural light to brighten a room without electricity.

The idea is to give consumers a hands-on, see-it-for-yourself experience in ways to save energy and help preserve natural resources, Smith said as he led visitors up the plastic lumber walkway into the house.

PARTNERSHIP IN GREEN

Tacoma's solid waste, sewer, stormwater and water utilities spent about \$22,500 each on the project, Smith said. Tacoma Power helped with electrical work and components. The state Department of Ecology provided \$28,000 in grant money.

Area companies donated \$93,000 in labor and materials costs.

Al Tebaldi, the city's solid waste division manager, believes the demonstration house is a prudent expenditure of ratepayers' money.

Part of the utilities' mission is educating the public about sustainable practices, Tebaldi said.

EnviroHouse project partners started with the "green house" Pierce County displayed for several years at the Puyallup Fair, relocated it to the entrance of the landfill and completely renovated it with new environmentally friendly products and technology.

There's a kitchen, a bathroom, a laundry room, a dining/living room, a deck, landscaping and a composting area.

"We really want to improve the awareness of green building," Smith said.

He also hopes the house and its contents – from lumber to landscaping, dishwasher to dining furniture – inspire people to learn about the benefits and barriers to preserving resources.

Cost, for example, might be a barrier to some would-be green remodelers.

Solar tubing, one of the biggest "wow" products in the house, can cost \$500 to \$1,000 installed, depending on the size, Smith said. That might turn out less expensive "than hiring an electrician to put in wiring," he added.

"It's one of the more popular products that we've had. The ones that I've heard people say they're going to get right away."

Adding a Flushmate to an existing bathroom requires buying both the tank system and a toilet that can accommodate it.

"A lot of people worry about the expense, but you can do a little at a time," said Charla Heutinck , one of the EnviroHouse guides.

'A HOUSE THAT'S HELPING'

Patty Moore and John Ciszewski , who are working on their 1911 Tacoma home, stopped by EnviroHouse while taking a load to the landfill.

"It's just so neat to have a house that's helping, rather than hurting, the environment," said Moore, who teaches middle school science and math in Seattle.

"I like the countertops. I like the lighting. I like anything that's going to take us away from overusing our resources," she said.

Moore was transfixed by a prism effect of the solar tubing.

Ciszewski proclaimed the countertops impressive "because you wouldn't recognize them as recycled materials."

The Avonite kitchen counters, made of what the manufacturer calls "reclaimed solid surface materials," might pass for granite at a glance.

Cabinets look like walnut, but they're made of Lyptus wood, which Weyerhaeuser describes as a renewable, high-yield hardwood from fast-growing eucalyptus trees.

Houses featuring environmentally friendly products aren't rare in commercial settings, but there aren't many city-sponsored examples, said Tacoma spokeswoman Michelle Warmuth.

The University of Florida runs Florida House Learning Center in Sarasota County. And there's an environmental learning center at Carkeek Park in Seattle.

Although the landfill setting is a bit out of the way for many people, Smith thinks it's the right place for people to learn about preserving scarce resources.

Besides, the city already gave tours of the landfill and the recycling center. It was easy to add EnviroHouse to the itinerary, he said.

Like many new homes, the house is still getting final touches. They include window coverings, soy candles, recycled glass bowls and artwork employing reused materials.

But students from elementary school pupils to Tacoma Community College science classes already have trooped across the bamboo and cork floors.

"It gives us a chance to talk to the kids about recyclables," said guide Devin Turner. "It gives them an environmental education at a young age."

The cost of seeing green

Here's a breakdown of out-of-pocket costs for EnviroHouse. Products valued at \$45,000 and labor valued at \$48,000 were donated.

Materials\$39,000

Storage\$3,600

Labor\$75,000

Total\$117,600

Who paid the bills?

City of Tacoma\$90,000*

State grants\$28,000

* The city's water, solid waste, sewer and stormwater utilities paid \$22,500 each. Tacoma Power provided other kinds of support.

Partners: Include Bates Technical College, the Master Builders Association of Pierce County, BCRA architects, MD Architects, The Berger Partnership and the Washington Conservation Corps. What: EnviroHouse, a demonstration project designed to show off ways consumers can use recycled goods and energy-saving devices in their homes.

Where: Tacoma Landfill, 3510 S. Mullen St.

Hours: Monday-Friday, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.; Saturdays and Sundays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Admission: Free

Information: www.cityoftacoma.org/envirohouse

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